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"THE SOUTHERN WOMAN,"

An Address Delivered by Mr. R. R. Rogers Before the Graduating Class of Harris Institute, Wednesday, June 3, 1891.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN; CLASS OF '91.:

I see before me to-night two generations of men and women who have learned their A. B. C. of life, as well as of letters, under one whose name for years has been a familiar and cherished household word in our community. All, I think, will testify that this name can never be mentioned without stirring up delightful recollections and exciting a feeling sense of gratitude. To some of us, who, more or less, have passed beyond our "salad days," Mrs. Harris appears, as time recedes, almost equally with ourselves, the fabricator of our destinies. To you, young ladies, the part she has played in shaping your early youth will not at first seem evident; you have felt the impress of the strong hand—some years must elapse before dispassionate thought and ampler experience will enable you to see clearly the skill and beauty of its touch. It is just when you are going to resign the influence of this capable instructor that I with great diffidence assume the honor of introducing you to your new life.

You must feel the deep importance of the present moment. You have reached that stream which marks the boundary between childhood and womanhood and before you extends in unbroken expanse that vast region of great possibilities, where you must now take up your permanent abode. You have emerged from the vestibule into the great audience-room of the world, and you should never take occasion to regret the narrow limits of the one for the magnificient proportions of the other. The period through which you have just passed has been one, it is true, of little troubles, but likewise of little joys; free from grave responsibility, perhaps, but full of laborious preparation. If there have been hours of pleasant reverie they have shaded into hours of pensive dissatisfaction, and your dearest dreams, like Cinderella's, have been ever followed by awkward awakenings to a monotonous present; often, no doubt, the plaything of your own sweet fancy, still you have always remained subject to direction rather irksome, and restraints, if wholesome and beneficial, yet unwelcome and unflattering. On the whole, you have lost nothing to mourn. Taking it at its best you have but lived in the twilight that precedes the breaking of the real day.

I have commenced in a conventional way, have I not? You would have expected me to have said so much,—yet how could I better prepare you for the glorious future that awaits you than by drawing a contrast with that half unwinsome past you have just forsaken; for you, my dear young ladies, are about to have conferred upon you the proudest title you may ever hope to wear; you are about to be enrolled among the Women of the South.

It has been the fortune of your choice of schools, and the good sense of your preceptor, that you are not unprepared for the honors your birth-place and your age have thrust upon you; but the grace and dignity with which they are to be borne must be your own. We doubt not your success. If you have the will, the powers have not been denied you. It may not be improper then, to say something of the new conditions that may be expected to surround you, and to describe briefly, and as best we can, the development and character of that noble type whose sisters you are by birth, and whose worthy reproduction you are hoped to become in your days of full expansion.

It has been a petted theory with our social philosophers, and a frequent theme with our orators, that the American man is the happy amalgamation of what is best in the men of many nations. He is, they say, the resultant of the best characteristics, drawn by a kind of natural selection, from the varied types of Europe. They can detect in the exemplar of our people the method of the Teuton; the restless activity of the Frank; and that appreciation of the polite in pleasure and art, that distinguished the Latin Races. In his genial nature, they see the Irishman; in his shrewdness, the Scot; and in his sturdy, upright independence and highest nobility of character, the Anglo-Saxon. It is not to be doubted that in the best specimens of our civilization we see this theory exemplified—men whose virtues and qualities are so diversified and striking that they surely must come from, not one, but from the admixture and contact of many stocks. However, this ethnological rule, so useful in forming a correct estimate of the true nature and composition of our people requires some discrimination before we can safely apply it to our present subject. Woman, as the whole machinery of her being is more delicate and nicely adjusted than that of man, is likewise the more sensitive to disarrangement; and more apt to show in immediate and essential changes, the introduction into her nature of each drop of a new ingredient. Should we see her what we would have her, we should seek her descent from those types where there is at least grossness of character and dullness of sensibility; where there is fortitude but not roughness; strength, but not coarseness; and warmth and love and grace and humility. I speak not of an ordinary ideal, but of what I believe to be an exaltad reality; and all that blood can produce, and time and condition round and complete, must aid me, if I explain on any reasonable ground of cause and effect, what I take to be the unquestionable supremacy of the female sex of the South.

It is then with peculiar pleasure that we find in the geneology of the women of the South the seeds of her development. The South was first settled by the loyal subjects of Great Britain and the Huguenots of France; and with little other inter-mixture, the Southern people have survived until to-day. I cannot say what impress we have gained from the dominion of Spain, once extended over a large portion of the South; but it is not impossible that our our people have absorbed something of the traditions and habits, something of that soft Castilian gaiety, which may be supposed to have come with Spanish contact. But wherein could one expect to find a more delightful combination of all qualities that add to woman's charms than might result from the union of the true-hearted, dauntless, magnanimous and self-respecting sons of English Cavaliers, and the warm, impulsive, sincere, gracious, highly-strung, but submissive daughters of French Huguenots. In the genial soil of the Atlantic slope this lovely flower grew and blossomed with ever increasing loviness. The rough surroundings of the first settlements added no little to the hardiness of its growth and the dignity of its appearance; but did not subdue that inbred refinement of soul, and simplicity of heart, that gentleness of bearing and fidelity to sex, transmitted from an aristocratic birth, and sustained by that true nobility of character, which even in the hour of hardship, of solitude, or of temptation, finds in itself its own best protector.

It is remarkable how, amidst the cotton fields of Georgia, and the tobacco plantations of Virginia, there existed even in the earliest days that distinctive and peculiar home life which gained for itself an honorable place in the plots of foreign romancists. Until the present day the South has uniformly been the home of those heroines of English writers who have deigned to draw their characters from the Western world, and some of the highest delineations of the Southern woman—even if not the most literally true to life—are to be found in the creations of Thackeray, of Trollope, or Walter Scott; the last of whom, it is said, drew his Rebecca of "Ivanhoe," from a prototype no less beautiful, in our own native State. It is not my purpose to draw an invidious comparison with the women of the North; but it is not the highest compliment, that the most elevated and critical of British novelists should have expended their grace, their pathos, all their force of idealization, on the woman of the South; while the highly-finished, luxuriously endowed, and elaborately educated girl of Northern and Eastern centres should have found a place only in the pages of the humorist, or with the acute and merciless satirist of empty forms and hollow distinctions.

Through the rotations of civilization in the South, from pioneer to planter, we find no conditions adverse to the best development of the female character; and in the latter time we see many positive causes why it should excel. The social life in the South before the war was intimately connected with the cultivation of the soil. The society was that of broad fields and limited intercourse. Each manor the centre of a wide domain, and surrounded by a numerous population of servants, formed a little community in itself of which the woman of the house was the loved and respected queen. To travel beyond the reach of her native surroundings was a task of grave difficulty, and seldom attempted. Perhaps a brief sojourn for educational purposes, or an occasional gathering with people of her kind at summer resorts, and the remainder of her life was spent in comparative isolation. There withdrawn from the influences of a society merely formal; removed from competition with classes, where wealth, rank, or culture necessitate stinging subordinations of caste, or lead to false pretensions and ignoble rivalries; compelled to draw from the resources of her own mind that recreation which the unvarying uniformity of her existence did not afford; cultivating year by year the spirit of generosity and forgiveness, of softness and forbearance, that each acquaintance might become a friend, and where friends were so rare that not one should ever be lost; unroughened by manual exertion; unruffled by needless excitement; guarded in her purity by the pride and devotion of men ever sensitive to the slightest touch of dishonor; the unconscious object of a universal deference, she grew at once into the most exquisite proportions of form and heart, and flourished for generations unspoiled, unsullied, in the grandeur of her simplicity. Simplicity! simplicity of heart, simplicity of soul, simplicity in every walk, that unbought grace of life, that loveliest inheritance from nature to her daughters. Simplicity has always been to me the distinguishing, as well as the most beautiful, characteristic of Southern women. In every trait that ought to win admiration and well with love the heart of man, we see it in that assuredness of her own rank, so uninsinuating; in that quiet dignity of speech and deportment so unobtrusive; in that unreserved and frank address towards all associates, in that unpatronizing consideration of all inferiors; in that innocence of the false in life and the fictitious in fashion; in that unrestrained expression of honest impulses, in that unswerving fidelity to the home circle and the house affairs, in her ingenuous modesty, in her sincerity, in every grand and noble purpose—it is there. The conditions which produced this fairest emanation of her own sunny land have passed away, but we will never believe—though we sometimes tremble—that with ease of inter-communication, the introduction of stranger elements, and stranger tastes, the sudden accumulation of unexpected fortunes, foreign travel and more frequent contact with artificial society and the fads of the great world, that this dear trait of Southern life will never cease to be the distinctive badge of Southern women.

The present woman of the South, and her position—her position since the war—admits of much curious thought and much careful investigation. The literature that has been produced concerning the South so copiously during the last decade and a half gives us no fixed and definite idea of the part woman has borne in the social re-organization, or of the conditions that now surround her. Not that this literature has been defective, either from want of inherent power or in inadequate treatment of subjects. Mr. Allen in a recent lecture has shown in a most delightful and convincing way the mission that the literature of the new South has performed in correcting a mistaken idea of our actual social state; but its most serious efforts have been directed against the prejudices created by the war, and handed down as a legacy of the old anti-slavery fanaticism that so wrought the passions and distorted the judgment of the North and West of thirty years ago. The burden of its song has been the negro. For twenty years the negro's position in the South has been described and analyzed; and the negro himself idealized and lifted to the level of a hero, to the exclusion of other subjects. The woman unfortunately has been made subsidiary to their treatment. Mr. Cable, Mr. Hearn, Miss Murfee and others have written of somewhat different phases of life, it is true, but have likewise confined themselves to the peculiar and exceptional, rather than the general type. And from the unnatural and unlovely heroines of Miss Rives, and the vacuous and misplaced coquettes of Miss Woolsen, from the sterile and unfamiliar portrayals of Tourgee and Mrs. Stowe, we are not able, even if we had the desire, to draw any light. The true Southern woman of society, of family and education, we know only by occasional glimpses. These glimpses, however, are of such exquisite beauty, that we can but deplore that they have not been made the basis of more sustained efforts.

There is an outline running through the dialect tales of Joel Chandler Harris, though vague, yet so winning and true, and so like what we might expect to see, that it seems to have crept from life into the author's pages unawares. And Mr. Page's "Polly" and "Meh Lady," well-known to us all, are delineations so engaging, and at the same time so familiar that they equally capture our affections and win our esteem. Assuredly when there is wit so true, and soul so appreciative, the power is not lacking to draw the imperishable portrait we so long for. The enlightenment of one portion of our nation and the vindication of the fairest part of the other is a cause worthy of the highest genius. The gratitude and applause that would follow would be a reward not unfitting its noblest effort. Since it is agreed that the negro as a basis of sentiment in literature—whether realistic or idealistic—having played his part, is to be heard no more, perhaps the day is not far distant when our wishes may be realized, and the subject may receive a treatment commensurate with its possibilities. And is it not a subject for the poet or the eulogist? Would it not glow with ever-changing beauty, under the stroke of genius, the worthy theme for the master mind? He, who, enlightened by love, and none other is fit, would tell her story, will first picture her gathering around her the scattered elements of a once happy home; soothing the sting of defeat; palliating the fall of state and pride; and lending to the first dark, bitter hour of agony and distress "that mild and healing sympathy that steals away their sharpness ere one is aware." And when despair shall have yielded to resignation, and resignation under the whip of necessity to energy and toil, and energy and toil shall have opened wide the gate-way to a development richer and more glorious than ere dreamed of in the old days of peace and plenty; when on the ashes of the past there shall have arisen a new life instinct with the genius and hope of regeneration, he will show her still in this morning of new promise the bright and cheering spirit of light, the conservator of religion, chastener of fierce and covetous desires, and the inspiration of all Christian impulses.

In an era of progress the amenities of life are not to be overlooked. In the clash of competition, amidst the clamor for opulence and the mad struggle for power, the graces of good breeding and the saving qualities of the soul are often neglected. Honor itself without some sanctity—unpolluted by the practical and material—around which to hover in this calculating day might lose from vulgar jostling and long disuse its capacity to reflect the stain, and its power to avenge the insult. Hence it is that our woman plays her part as the softener of the coarser and the preserver of the gentler traits of life; and but for her and her influence, the mourner over the follies and errors of the human race might well long for a return to the apathy and humble pretensions of the old idyllic days.

Such we believe to be something of the conditions that await you now, and such is the mission you can and must perform. It is the glory of your sisters in the field that in this they have not failed. Nail it to your pride not to be unworthy of them.

I would do injustice to my subject, and fail in respect to an impression so universal and widely accepted as to command attention, did I not speak of what is called the "idleness and helplessness" of Southern women. Never taught to work, knowing no trade, how in the hour of adversity can she sustain, it is said, her trials and troubles: how can she who has never known aught but dependence hope to overcome unaided, the reverses of life. Well, she does do it, and has done it, and we might dismiss the subject by referring to the heroic attitude of our women in the days of poverty and want that followed the war, or by recalling any of those many instances of fortitude under private disaster familiar to the recollections of each one present; but that the charge as stated naturally involves a discussion of a phase of our life, which has had much to do in bringing about the high development of our women.

The normal sphere of woman is the sphere of society. No where else can she appear to half the advantage, or do half so much good. The history of human progress proves it the wide world over. There has never been a time nor a place, where woman, in the economy of national life, has been assigned any other position than that of the social factor, and there has not followed a degradation in morals, a falling off in humanity, and a pause in civilization. When woman descends into the maelstrom of business life, nothing but a prevailing consideration that her course is unusual, and dictated by necessity, will preserve for her the immunities of her sex. Should the impression obtain that she pursues a career of her own unbiased choice, these immunities will scarcely be accorded her. If such a course is pursued by the women of a community as a mass, if they are educated professionally for the purpose, and backed in their designs by public opinion, there will follow an immediate decline in sentiment and refinement; woman will harden; man untempered by the exercise of courtesy, will grow coarser in fibre; and future progress will be marked by a loss in dignity and a lowering in the moral tone. The respect of man for woman and the dignity of woman herself are reciprocal; one upholds the other, and the latter will not survive when causes exist to destroy the natural distinctions between the sexes which is the source of the first, and such causes will always exist when man is permitted to treat with woman on a basis of familiar business equality. It is thus from those very assertions which are cast in our teeth as items of reproach, that we logically deduce the excellence of our woman. It is because she is, and has always been withdrawn from the active affairs of the world, from the sordid influence and uncerimonious bustle of industrial and professional life, to the direction of the domestic and social circle—that her peculiar amiability of character, delicacy of sentiment and refinement of beauty are to be attributed.

I do not wish to be looked upon as one who regards with other than the very highest admiration, her, who, reduced by necessity sacrifices feeling, and bravely takes up and bears the cross of life. Thousands of our women have done it over and over again rather than bow supinely beneath the churlish blasts of ill fortune. They are the glory of their sex, and the history of heroism offers no nobler spectacle. But I should regard it as one of the greatest evils that could befall the women of the South, the general introduction and adoption of those ideas that are so noisily lauded in pulpit and lyceum by the mad sophists of social reform. And so, perhaps, it may be understood, why I say that in social life—I am not talking of mere fashionable society—is found the proper and most influential field for woman to exercise her talents. Theano, Livia, Mdme. de Stael, Mdme. Roland, the Duchess of Devonshire and Mrs. Cleveland have been not less important factors in their day, than Theodora, Boadicea, Joan of Arc, Catherine, George Elliott and Dr. Mary Walker, and their characters have been far more lovely. That their influence was directed through the drawing room rather than from the field of action did not render it less persuasive or less beneficial. The unseen hand is often the strongest, and that influence which noiselessly insinuates itself, may well hope for better results, than that which boastfully proclaims its power from the hill tops.

It is with much pleasure that I congratulate you that your tuition has been directed by one who, though a native of another clime, has yet caught the true spirit of the Southern life, and understands thoroughly the needs of the Southern young lady. Her pupils have ever carried with them the impress of their training, adapting themselves easily to the calls of society, and yet supporting with dignity the demands of duty and the requirements of necessity.

But I cannot conclude without a word for a characteristic of the Southern man, that nearly concerns you. You are going into action, and an "old guard" of knightly sentiments and old-fashioned virtues will surround and protect you. Some traces of that chivalry, which ever loved to bleed and die for woman's sake, which ever carried within the most sacred precincts of the heart the story of woman's weakness, and ever bore upon the arm the lance to protect it, seem to have survived among the sons of the South. No where else in the wide world has loyalty to sex and generous subordination to the affairs of the heart taken a firmer hold upon nation-a feeling. The traditions of that splendid order reared on the four corner stones of valour, fidelity, courtesy and munificence were early transported to our shores, and may still be seen to linger in that almost religious exaltation of the female sex handed down through many generations from father to son, until it has become an hereditary trait of character. This inbred instict, which even the worst of associations, and long years of dissipation cannot wholly efface, is perhaps the noblest quality of the Southern gentleman, and has obtained for him abroad a consideration equal to that which it has won for the woman herself at home. Said a gentleman from Boston to me in a distant place: "Sir, I have asked an introduction because you are a Kentuckian; you are from the South; from a country where woman is respected." This is a compliment that needs no comment. I myself can never refer to it without an emotion of patriotic pride.

In speaking of this noble subject in my own enfeebled way, I have not remained unconscious that it has other than its epic side. But let another hand attempt to criticize; I would be no impartial judge. Still when the most crucial analysis of her character has been made, I believe that it will remain to be said of the woman of the South that her gravest offences are against convention, and her worst failings are against the demands of art; and that after all, her faults, if many, are never those of the [illegible]. And whatever may be predicted of future development, it will be admitted that heretofore she has maintained alike in prosperity and adversity the veneration of her associates, and in doing so the respect of the [illegible]